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War, Propaganda, and Photography: The Chinese Photographer Sha Fei (1912-1950)

Principal Investigators: Eliza Ho

Eliza Ho's dissertation explores the growth and development of prolific war photographer Sha Fei, and how his work contributed to the rise of revolutionary, proletarian culture in China. She contends that his work demonstrates a progressive erasure of the boundaries between art and politics.

Sha Fei's most critical pieces were shot over more than a decade of war from 1937 to 1949. He became a photographer for the Chinese Communist Party during the War of Resistance against Japan (1937-45), and later during the Civil War of 1945-49.

Ho's dissertation divides Sha Fei's work into four periods:

- His membership in *Heibei yingshe*, the largest black-and-white photography society in 1930s Shanghai.
- His solo exhibitions in Guangzhou and Guilin in 1936 and 1937.
- His recruitment by the CCP to chronicle the life of the Eighth Route Army during the war.
- His founding of *Jin-Cha-Ji huaboo*, a wartime pictorial magazine that later became the major propaganda magazine of the People's Republic of China.

Using Mershon funds, Ho traveled to Chinese museums, libraries, and archives in Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Beijing, and Taiyuan (in Shanxi Province). She was able to access an array of manuscripts and pictorial magazines, in addition to many photographs, many from the private collection of Gu Di, Sha Fei's only surviving student.

Ho's trip also provided an unexpected and invaluable collaboration that aided her research: Sha Fei's daughter, Wang Yan, shared with Ho the results of 10 years work as the



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manager in the Sha family collection, and personal insights into her father's life. The subsequent introductions to other museum and collection staff that Wang Yan provided proved extremely helpful in gaining access to additional materials.

Finally, Ho was touched on a personal level during her trip to China, her country since 1997 when Hong Kong was returned from British rule. She was impressed with easy access to resources at archives where researchers were once constrained by red tape, revealing the new openness of the Chinese state.

She also observed the construction of Olympic architectures in Beijing, and how locals are adapting to environmental changes. According to Ho, "my experience convinced me that China and its people are, at their own paces, constantly re-inventing themselves to adapt to changes."

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